

"EARTHEN VESSELS"

Text: II Corinthians 4:7 - 12

September 1, 1968

"But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you."

- II Corinthians 4: 7-12

For a moment consider some spiritual aspects of the motivation crises that haunt our generation of Christians. At the fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches there were six working sections within which the Assembly was divided for study: 1. Mission and Renewal, 2. World Mission, 3. Worship, 4. Holy Spirit and Catholicity of the Church, 5. Christian Style of Life, 6. World Peace and Justice.

Four of these were clearly devoted to the inward look at the church and its life: The sections on: Mission and Renewal, Worship, Styles of Life, and Holy Spirit and Catholicity of the Church. That is to say, that more than half of the delegates were instructed to devote their principal attention at the Assembly to the problems and future directions of the inner life of the Christian movement in the world today.

The question is this, when you get right down to it: Is the Christian faith relevant for our time, or is it so out of date and old-fashioned or even invalid that it is not adequate as a source of motivation for man and his society today?

This question strikes at two levels both of which are crucial: 1. The message of Christianity itself, and 2. The bearer of that message, the Christian Church. (It will be my intent to speak primarily to the second question at this point since I have tried to address the first question at some length in three series of sermons that are in print: Shaking of the Foundations (1967), Barmen Declaration (1965), and World Council of Churches Creedal Series (1966).)

Let me briefly address the first question. The affirmation of Christianity can be divided into three generic parts:

(1) Christianity is an affirmation about Ultimate Reality. The Old and New Testaments teach us that at the center of everything is the God character. He who is and who loves, who wills, who speaks for himself to humanity. This is God and Christianity affirms the radical idea that this one has in fact spoken for himself in Jesus Christ.

(2) Christianity is an affirmation about Man. From the first chapter to the last of the Bible, Man is persistently portrayed as that crowning wonder of the created order who has the head erect and the God-sized vacuum within his nature so that he is the one who can only be fulfilled by God himself. Nothing in all of the

universe is analagous to Man but the God who made him.

(3) Christianity is an affirmation about history. Biblical faith insists that Creation is meaningful and that this meaning comes from God, the Creator and Redeemer. The good news of Christian faith is the mixture of these three great affirmatives in favor of Man and that in spite of our moral crises that have been caused by our sin and weakness, Christ has come along side of us and taken upon himself this very crisis and has won the decisive victory over its terror.

Is all of this relevant for modern living in the year of rapid social change, 1968? Yes! I believe it is, and in fact the rugged and challenging ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ has never been more relevant than it is in this year of the decisive act.

The second question asks: Is the Christian Church relevant? Can anything be done with us? At one meeting at Uppsala, James Baldwin, the American novelist and essayist spoke on the race crisis; he had been introduced to the meeting as an agnostic. Mr. Baldwin began his address with a denial of the agnostic definition and said something to this effect: "I am not really an agnostic; I don't have any problem with Jesus. It's you Christians I have my problem with, it's you that I can't stomach." I suppose that there are a lot of people in Manila who feel precisely the same and you and I meet them fairly frequently; they aren't against Christ or the great central affirmations of Christendom, but the church is just another matter.

Each one of us can draw up a long list of the problems and irrelevancies that in the past and in the present characterize the Christian Church.

The church suffers from the plain and ordinary garden variety sins of humanity like any human institution: those of weakness and of avarice, but they seem particularly bad when located within so lofty a fellowship as the church.

Our inaction, our fatigue, our tendency toward trivialization, our softness, our hypocrisies--all of these and many other complaints against the church should be accurately diagnosed and fortunately for us, 1968 has produced an impressive corps of social critics who have been hard at work in levelling all social institutions with enthusiasm. Though it goes naturally across the grain of our sentiment to hear out the chronicallers of the church's problems, we should be grateful for the healthy effect such criticisms have upon an institution like the Christian Church.

But the really important matter is this: How are problems like these corrected? How can the Christian community rise to the occasion and become relevant to our age? Let me offer three images to stir up our thoughts on this really important subject:

(1) We in the church are like an athlete and, therefore, we grow strong when strained, taxed to the fullest; we fade and atrophy when the life we live is too easy. This year my daughter has been taking swimming lessons and one day during her regular lesson, I was observing the technique of her instructor. He paced her throughout the 45 minute lesson without a

single break or rest. At one point when I could see that the little girl was tired out, I said innocently enough to the instructor, "Rudy, perhaps she should have a little rest now for just a minute and then she can continue the lesson." His answer was this: "No, never that. If she doesn't swim when she is tired, she will never develop endurance." It turned out that he was right. I have been thinking about this very basic truth that Rudy had meant for swimming but which has implications into every realm of life. Ease may be more deadly to the Christian Church than persecution. In persecution the church is forced to go deep into its best resources to develop endurance. Just the opposite is true in ease; where the context within which the church is set is so favorable that the Christian is not required to grow inwardly, to think through his faith or to develop intellectual, moral and spiritual endurance, then in the comforts of such a setting the life of the church ebbs away. Like the athlete, the Christian community can never rest on previous achievements or heroic moments in the church's war archives but must be continuously at work, in condition to meet the next inevitable race.

(2) The Christian Church is also like a tree. In Psalms God's people are likened to a "tree planted by the rivers of living water." About two years ago the members of the property committee of our church transplanted a medium-sized Acacia tree to our playground area and it promptly died. The gardeners cut the tree down and left a stump. Within a few weeks a new acacia began to grow up around the former stump until gradually the old, now dead plant was completely surrounded by the new tree. This Acacia, now large and beautiful, has forcibly proved to me a principle of growth that applies to human institutions. An institution like the church grows at the edges, around the circumference. The life flows near the edge of the tree; not in the woody interior but at the part of the tree that is most exposed to the outside world and, therefore, most vulnerable. This is a fascinating truth! The Christian Church has grown best where it has most dared to touch the world around it. In a very profound sense, the modern missionary movement of the 19th Century rescued American and European Protestantism from the dread waddy disease of Western, Victorian provincialism. In the missionary cause of the 19th century the Western church discovered ancient Christian communities such as the old Christian Churches in South India and in the Middle East. As young churches began to grow into maturity throughout the world, they in turn also had a vital impact on the European and American Churches. It is a fact that out of mission was born the most exciting fact of the 20th Century -- the ecumenical movement. It will always be true of our kind of community that the church will grow and gain stature as it risks involvement in stretching out toward the concrete situation around it. We are that kind of tree and we just do not grow in any other way. Remind them of this: all those who tell you that the church should keep its hands off secular matters, should avoid the apparently non-spiritual issues.

(3) And the Christian church is like the creature man himself. Everything that can be said about man, his weaknesses, his greatness, his value, is true of that gathering of men and women which our Lord called together and set into the midst of the human story. The most unique and fascinating fact about man is that he is the creature who cannot live without relationship. Nothing else in creation is as relationship-oriented as is man. This is so because man has been granted the capacity to communicate

to need and be needed to an extent that far exceeds the rest of the created order which is sustained to a greater degree by instinct.

"Is it really true that all Christians need each other if they are to know God and respond rightly to His love in Jesus Christ? In the Ecumenical Movement we have thus been learning, not only the dependence of each Christian upon his brothers, but also that the Churches, unhappily still divided, need each other too. There is limitation and distortion of the very knowledge of God, when any church or denomination 'goes it alone.'"

We cannot go it alone and I suppose this way in which God has made us is the primeval motive for the Ecumenical Movement. When churches have recognized the fact that as we need each other to be whole and truly human, so the principle holds true that our individual community of faith needs all other communities of faith as well to be fully the church.

Jesus said, "I am the vine and you are the branches." This is the classic ecumenical text. As we are closest to the Lord, our vine, we shall be closest to the other branches.